

Employer engagement and support: insights from Supported Employment services **Guidance for services, commissioners and policy makers**

Who is this guide for?

This guide should be used by commissioners, policy makers or providers setting up, funding or managing employment support services for population groups with health conditions, disabilities or more complex barriers to employment. The findings come from research with Supported Employment services but are applicable to all types of employment service.

Research background to this guidance

These findings form part of an applied research project funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) between 2022 and 2024 exploring Supported Employment across different Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF) services in the UK for population groups other than severe mental health (the traditional group supported by IPS services). Population groups supported in these services were those with low to moderate mental health and/or physical health conditions, autism and/or learning disabilities, substance misuse issues, housing insecurity and homelessness, and ex-offenders. The findings draw on 71 interviews with frontline employment specialists and team managers of Supported Employment services, clients, local commissioners of Supported Employment services, co-location partners, and employers.

What is 'employer engagement' and why does it matter?

All employment services want to engage employers in order to seek to support clients into paid employment. However, this is a highly limited supply-side view of what employer engagement is and can be in employment services.

Firstly, the findings below highlight a range of forms and extents that 'employer engagement' can take, discusses how these differences can be thought of as potentially mapping onto different types of workless groups, and outlines how these differences can be expected to lead to different experiences and outcomes for (different kinds of) individuals and employers.

Secondly, for employment services such as Supported Employment that work with clients with more complex barriers to employment, employer engagement is typically essential in order to give clients a realistic prospect of moving into paid work.

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Thirdly, effective employer engagement helps to better match workers, jobs and employers than employment services that seek simply to place clients in any job. Better matched jobs help to improve job sustainment and wellbeing for workers and help to reduce staff turnover, recruitment and training costs for employers.

Fourthly, employers can (and we would argue should) also be seen as 'clients' of employment services alongside workless individuals, helping business to recruit and retain the right talent to help them succeed. In this view one can think about 'employer engagement and support' as the approach of the employment service (i.e. a linked supply-side and demand-side approach), not just supply-side employer engagement that sees employers as passive recipients of (more or less suitable) individual jobseekers.

Employer engagement as key to effective client support and job matching

The Supported Employment services that we interviewed unanimously agreed that for these client groups the type of dedicated, proactive service-involved employer engagement described in Supported Employment model were beneficial for all clients and absolutely necessary for some clients:

'traditional employment models, where it's just sort of, you know, sort of give them a work placement, hope that it goes for the best, connect with a employer, do a bit of a CV, it just doesn't work...They need a much more supportive wrap around service'

'We could train some of our clients how to write a CV for the next five years and they still wouldn't get a job as a result of it'

Central to any Supported Employment model are client preferences and job matching, by which is meant the matching of a client to an employer, job role and workplace context that fits their strengths and needs well. Understanding the nature of jobs and workplaces in order to deliver job matching is core to any (good) Supported Employment service (and, we would argue, any good employment service). The desired outcomes of job matching are to help jobs be rewarding and sustained for both clients and employers. To effectively job match, Supported Employment services identified the strengths, needs and passions of their clients via rich whole-person vocational profiling (the supply-side of the match) that usually takes several sessions. Separately they also engage and listen to employers to understand their business workforce needs, job roles and workplace cultures and contexts (the demand-side of the match). As these employment specialists described:

'it's all preference based, it's person centred, you know. We'll look at the person's skills and then try and match it'

'a huge part of it is about getting the right match, getting the right fit for the employer and for the individual, getting the support right as well.'

The Supported Employment services that we interviewed described how they were playing a more active and direct role around employer engagement in order to support their clients than other forms of UK employment support services.

'We're not doing as much signposting as I initially thought we might because we're doing it ourselves in a nutshell. And we are formulating a direct team with the customer in question, the client in question and we're going to those appointments with the client, you know, we're actually doing it with the client. So, we're on that journey with them in that regard...ultimately, it's the direct approach and contact that we're having with the employers'

As they did so, services were aware of the need to reflect continually on the roles and balance between employment specialist and clients regards employer engagement – recognising and supporting client's needs as appropriate but always doing things with and not for clients and always seeking to empower clients to do (and be) the most independent and self-supporting that they could be. Supported Employment staff were therefore always attentive to opportunities to give client's opportunities to act themselves and to gradually fade support and shift that balance towards clients as they moved through the support journey with them:

'this is all about that person being in the driving seat. But if you plonk someone in the driving seat, and they've never been in the driving seat before, they don't know what to do....So it is about tailoring it to the individual, understanding the individual's needs, and then you can understand how much, if we use the word, power...how much control and input [each party has]'

Varieties of employer engagement: from employer engagement and support

Our findings highlighted that 'employer engagement' should be understood more of a continuum than a single homogenous idea. Reflecting on what 'employer engagement' can potentially look like in any employment programme, Figure 1 outlines a series of gradually expanding steps of employer engagement and support with the weakest forms at the top and approaches gradually expanding and strengthening as one moves downwards.

Figure 1: A continuum of employer engagement and employer support inside employment support interventions



Step one: Employment services with no employer engagement or support

At its weakest end, clients of employment services make poorly matched applications for jobs largely without support, they receive support from a service but still make poorly matched job applications, or they make largely well matched job applications but without support from the service. None of these approaches involve employer engagement or support from the service. Much of the UK's employment support can arguably be located in this group of approaches. Indeed, conditionality and sanctions in the UK benefits system has been found to burden employers with high volumes of poorly matched job applications as jobseekers seek simply to satisfy conditionality requirements. In contrast, none of the Supported Employment services that we interviewed could be located in this group.

Step two: Specific employer engagement and indirect employer support

Towards the centre of the continuum employment services actively support clients to growing extents through different and fuller aspects of the job application and sustainment process. The Supported Employment community would describe these steps as 'specific' (or 'client-specific') employer engagement because they are oriented from the outset around a specific client. In our interviews with Supported Employment providers there was extensive evidence of services located in this section of the continuum. These services worked to support clients in identifying and applying for appropriate vacancies and, with client consent, supported with interviews, discussing and arranging pre-employment work accommodations with employers, and in-work support including in-work job coaches for SEQF services.

Step three: General employer engagement and direct support

At the fullest extent of the spectrum, a final set of steps deliver what the Supported Employment community would describe as 'general' or 'broadbrush' employer engagement and support – that is, dedicated employer-focused work without any particular client in mind in order to engage and learn about businesses, what their workforce needs were, and how they might help them recruit well matched staff:

'at that broad-brush employer engagement level it is not about the individual'

'the way we support the employer is very similar to the way we support the individual so it's really looking at the employers needs in detail'

'we do see the employer as a service user really...We're not seeing them as something we're selling to, or, you know, let's ask them for this. We want to have that ongoing relationship. And I think it's fine to use the word relationship as well, because you are building that with the person that's looking for work, but also with the employer as well'

A minority of the Supported Employment services that we interviewed could be located at this fullest end of the continuum. Where they existed, however, the significant difference in approach was clear and the services were convinced of its value-add to both clients and employers. The interviews suggested that services located in this section of the employer engagement and support continuum were strong services in other aspects of their Supported Employment delivery. In other words, there was a sense that as Supported Employment services strengthened in general terms across their adherence to fidelity and outcomes that they deepened their position in the continuum presented in Figure 1. Interestingly, there seemed a lack of awareness and understanding from many other services and staff that we interviewed about even the existence and possibility of these types of general employer engagement and support – a marker perhaps of their relative

absence from the UK employment support landscape more broadly. This suggests that part of the challenge/need may be around education and training for services and commissioners in the potential nature and extent of what employer engagement and support can potentially be.

For services delivering these deeper forms of employer engagement and support, key and distinctive parts of their Supported Employment offer were felt to be:

- a genuine desire to understand and help the employer as part of long-term relationship of mutual honesty, trust and benefit
- the commitment to only suggesting well matched candidates
- an open offer of work preparation, accommodations, carving and on-going in-work support for the employer (as for the jobseeker) without a fixed end point, even if a jobseeker is formally exited from the Supported Employment service
- an open offer of core work-related EDI training (e.g. inclusive recruitment, neurodiversity in the workplace, job carving, Access to Work) either at low cost or delivered free-of charge as part of another contract.

How does effective employer engagement and support happen?

Six key aspects of effective employer engagement emerged from our research:

- **Staffing:** staff need to be comfortable and confident 'selling' the service and its offer to new employers and facing rejection. In Supported Employment services all frontline employment specialists are expected to also engage employers. In some larger services this was supplemented by dedicated general employer engagement staff (i.e. a staff member with no client caseload who is employer-facing only).
- **Data:** services built up a dedicated database of engaged local employers along with a detailed description of the nature of the business, workplace context, organisational culture, and any recruitment preferences or needs – so-called 'hidden jobs'. This database was available to all employment specialists and their clients in the service to seek a well matched candidate (i.e. a collective culture of employer relationships and opportunities).
- **Relationships:** social media (especially LinkedIn) was described by services as a great tool to reach and connect Supported Employment services with local employers, growing awareness of the service, its offer and potential benefits to employers. Employer networking events and job fairs were routinely used and seen as helpful to connect with new employers locally and to raise awareness of the service's offer. Once employer contacts were made, a relationship was sought to be created between the Supported Employment service and the employer through catch-up meetings, open communications and an open offer of help with current staff or future workforce needs.

- **Local proactivity:** services described how effective employer engagement did involve proactively 'cold calling' new employers outlining the service offer via face-to-face visits, phonecalls, Teams/Zoom or networking events. Building resilience in staff to rejection was important and successful services wasted no opportunity to get their service brand and offer out there to employers to continuously raise awareness and build new contacts and relationships. The task of building an engaged employer network was described by services as a gradual one taking years to really develop, on-going and key. Where services had delivered effective employer engagement and support for employers for many years locally – which inevitably includes reliably delivering and adding-value for employers as promised during that period – then they had been able to build up a deep level of employer awareness, relationships, engagement and trust. This was invaluable to their clients given their frequent need for employer support of some form or other and can be considered as valuable employer and employment support 'infrastructure' in that locality.
- **Planned elevator pitch and relationship building strategy:** Supported Employment providers described how they worked with their frontline staff to get everybody confident in 'selling' their service to new employers and, if received warmly, in walking through a three-step relationship building strategy with any new employer: meeting one is to quickly listen, outline the service offer, and explore employer interest; meeting two is to listen and understand their business and workforce needs in greater depth; meeting three seeks to meet the employer's workforce needs (e.g. to offer a well matched client) and to set up a longer-term relationship.
- **Training offer:** many of the Supported Employment services that we interviewed were playing an important broader role beyond their own particular clients in education and training to employers about a variety of health and disability-related issues including inclusive recruitment, workplace diversity, effective workplace practices for staff with disabilities, and so on. As well as being beneficial to employers, this broader training offer was described as a helpful part of these service's opening offer to employers to engage them.

Key challenges in employer engagement

Although services saw employer engagement as key they also consistently described it as one of the – if not the – most challenging aspect of the Supported Employment model to deliver. Four key challenges emerged in interviews:

- **Employer attitudes:** whilst many employers were open to working with Supported Employment services and their clients, services did highlight frequent challenges around employer attitudes and openness to hiring people with health conditions, disabilities or disadvantage (e.g. substance misuse, homelessness). As such, staff had to be resilient to rejection from employers and felt that there was an on-going task in trying to educate employers around the benefits to their business of inclusive recruitment and workforces.

- **Client disclosure:** related, clients often decided that they did not want their support needs disclosed to employers, or did not want the Supported Employment service to contact employers at all (since the service worked only with these client groups). This naturally limited the information shared, work preparation or in-work support conducted, or employer contacts able to be made. For many clients, and particularly those with substance misuse issues, disclosure proved a key barrier to effective employer engagement and everything that flows from it in terms of workplace preparation, accommodations and in-work support.
- **Staff comfort and capability:** A common finding across services was that although Supported Employment specialists may be drawn from a variety of sectors they tended to have worked with, and want to work with, helping vulnerable people. The demand-side employer engagement function was described as an entirely different skillset and much more of a sales role. Services frequently described that they struggled to hire Supported Employment staff who were skilled in, or felt naturally comfortable with, the employer engagement side of the role. In response, services sought to hire at least one employer-facing expert amongst their staff team and in their training focused on upskilling around employer engagement. A range of training mechanisms were used including induction, buddying, one-to-one supervisions, internal employer engagement staff 'champions' delivering internal training and advice, and regular (e.g. annual) training refreshers.
- **Resource pressures:** there was some evidence that resource pressures and caseload size were leading Supported Employment services to feel it necessary to trim out aspects of 'gold standard' Supported Employment fidelity/delivery, with fuller employer engagement and support seeming particularly vulnerable to these pressures (potentially related to staff challenges around it as outlined above). The consequence where this was seen was services reverting back to a more standard client-focused, supply-side 'vacancy chasing' employment support model without one of the key distinctive elements of Supported Employment of benefit/need to jobseekers and employers.

Want further details?

Feel free to contact the lead author, Prof Adam Whitworth, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, to discuss further: adam.whitworth@strath.ac.uk

Check out the Resources page of the project website for a range of wider project resources including webinars, briefings, academic publications, IPS cost-benefit resources, and illustrations: www.ipsbeyondbeyondsmi.org/resources

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The University Of Sheffield.

